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Astoria and Empire

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Book Reviews

Astoria and Empire, by James P. Ronda. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990. xiv, 400 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$25.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY WILLIAM E. FOLEY, CENTRAL MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY

Astoria, John Jacob Astor's star-crossed enterprise in the Pacific Northwest, has attracted more than its share of chroniclers. Several of the Astorians themselves put pen to paper to give us their recollections of the failed attempt to establish a fur-trading empire at the mouth of the Columbia River early in the nineteenth century. And at Astor's behest, the noted American author Washington Irving produced *Astoria; or, Anecdotes of an Enterprise beyond the Rocky Mountains*. For generations, Irving's romantic literary tale shaped popular perceptions of the ambitious American commercial venture. In our own century, Hiram Martin Chittenden, Kenneth Porter, and Frederick Merk were among the distinguished scholars who explored the subject. But in spite of all of the attention lavished upon Astoria and the Pacific Fur Company, many aspects of this complex story remained unexamined. That is no longer the case, thanks to the publication of James P. Ronda's splendid new book, *Astoria and Empire*. Ronda's skillfully crafted account places the oft-told Astorian tale in a broader context and gives it new meaning and added significance. He deftly transforms the history of the ill-fated venture into a riveting story of national rivalry, personal ambition, and cultural diversity.

Ronda views Astoria as a "part of a large and complex struggle for national sovereignty in the Northwest" that marked the concluding chapter in the battle for American empire born during the Age of Columbus (xii). Ronda is not the first to recognize the imperial dimensions of Astor's grand schemes, but he offers a much more comprehensive account of the New York merchant's vision of a vast trade network extending from western Europe and the American Great Lakes to the Pacific Northwest and on to Russian America and China. He also details Astor's complicated maneuverings to make his dream a reality. He portrays Astor as a calculating and pragmatic entrepreneur whose venture became the "focus for a powerful western dream" (2). Ronda downplays the Lewis and Clark expedition's influence in

shaping Astor's grandiose plans and credits instead the eighteenth-century ventures of Peter Pond, Captain James Cook, Alexander Henry the elder, Duncan McGillivray, and Alexander Mackenzie among others. Finally, unlike most earlier versions of Astoria, Ronda's cast includes a varied assortment of characters reflecting North America's cultural diversity. In his story Hawaiian sailors and Chinook headmen take their places alongside Montreal merchants and American politicians as advance agents of empire.

This is history as it should be written. Anyone with an interest in western history will not want to miss this compelling book.

Pastoral Inventions: Rural Life in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture, by Sarah Burns. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989. xi, 377 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$39.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY DAVID B. DANBOM, NORTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

Sarah Burns's *Pastoral Inventions* is a provocative, searching, and erudite examination of the artistic, and to a lesser extent the literary, portrayal of rural Americans in the nineteenth century. Burns contends, convincingly I think, that depictions of rural people had much less to do with the reality of their lives than with what artists, authors, and, by extension, their audience thought reality was or ought to be. The target audience for art and literature with rural themes was northeastern, urban, and middle class. As the nineteenth century proceeded, this audience grew in numbers, wealth, and sophistication, forming a swelling market for the prints of Currier and Ives and such polite periodicals as *Harper's Weekly*, and providing a means of sustenance for the American Art-Union, the National Academy of Design, and other organizations supporting native artists and their works.

The consumers of American art knew what they liked, and they liked to have their rural people represented in ways that were reassuring and flattering. Hence, farm life was commonly portrayed as peaceful and idyllic, farm children were characterized as happy and carefree, and their parents were seen as strong, virtuous, and self-sufficient. Rural people were commonly made to represent prototypical Americans with all of the Yankee virtues. The fact that artists' subjects were most often northeastern farmers, rather than southern blacks or midwestern immigrants, underscored the comfortable American image.

Burns correctly notes that this image had little to do with the reality of a complex countryside caught up in commercialization and mechanization. What it did have to do with was reassuring urbanites

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